

Press Statement

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Dark Day in 106 Years of Probation Service

Today is the last working day of the 35 Probation Trusts of England and Wales as they are being closed down by the Secretary of State despite significant concerns that it is dangerous to do so. Chris Grayling's "Transforming Rehabilitation" programme will see the Trusts replaced with a National Probation Service dealing with Court work and high risk of harm offenders and 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies working with low to medium risk of harm offenders which will be then sold off to the private sector in October this year. The reforms have been widely criticised since they were first announced.

Ian Lawrence General Secretary, of Napo the probation union, said: "these ideas have never been tested anywhere in the world. To split the risk management of offenders is a dangerous social experiment that we along with other stakeholders believe will place the public at risk of serious harm."

Napo believes that separating the management of offenders has led to a significant increase in bureaucracy for staff who are already overwhelmed due to high levels of staff shortages, with 500 vacancies nationally. Fragmenting the service will make communication between all the agencies far more difficult and will lead to serious further offences being committed, errors made in risk assessments and all local accountability will be lost.

Ian Lawrence said: "these are huge changes to a high performing public service that in 2011 won the Gold Award for Excellence. Not only is there no case to justify dismantling it but the impact of doing so will be felt widespread by the public both in terms of safety and through their taxes."

Shadow Justice Secretary Sadiq Khan, speaking out against the reforms and calling for a pilot, said: "Of course we need to do more to reduce re-offending but the best way to do this is to build on what works, not rip everything up and start again. These plans are a toxic cocktail of disaster and it is public safety that's being put at risk. I know from what staff are telling me that there's chaos in the probation service. Sky high sickness levels and dozens of unfilled vacancies meaning serious and violent offenders aren't getting the proper supervision they need to stop them committing further crimes. Probation is in meltdown because of Chris Grayling's hare brained privatisation and it is the public who are being put at risk as a result"

At the Public Accounts Committee earlier this year MOJ officials were unable to put a figure on the cost of the reforms but did disclose that they had spent £9 million already on consultants alone. There are growing concerns that the Secretary of States attempts to negotiate 21 ten year contracts in a matter of months is bound to lead to mistakes that will end up costing the tax payer significantly in the long run.

Ian Lawrence added: "The MOJ doesn't exactly have a good record when it comes to contract management as evidenced by the tagging fiasco with G4S and Serco. We have also experienced Serco running Unpaid Work in London, which has also been a disaster; and of course now the issues arising from Capita running the Court Interpreter contract. Why should the public have any faith that this process will run any differently particularly in an aggressive time table such as this?"

The current programme is running to an election timetable rather than in the interests of public safety and this is evidenced by the fact that none of the programme, including the payment by results element has been piloted before. Ursula Brennan, Permanent Secretary gave the PAC assurances that the programme would not go ahead unless it was deemed safe to do so but despite concerns about the safety and business readiness of the programme the Trusts will still close down on 31st May.

The real concern amongst Unions, staff and stakeholders is the lack of infrastructure in place for the closure of the Trusts.

Ian Lawrence said: "there is still an awful lot of basic things not in place to ensure a smooth transition. This whole programme is predicated on the Offender Rehabilitation Act that will see the supervision of those serving under-12-months custody. But the MoJ has clearly said it has no intention of implementing this prior to share sale. How can they know the new system will work without properly testing it in its entirety and how will bidders know what they bidding for if the supervision of an additional 50,000 cases is not included in those tests."

Napo along with parliamentarians is urging the government and the Permanent Secretary not to sign off the split of the 31st May; as it is clear it is not safe or business ready to do so.

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